

# Let's Not Show the Teacher: EFL Students' Secret Exchange Journals

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*By Lynn Worthington*

Teachers of writing who would like to involve their students in journal writing but don't have the time to do teacher-student dialogue journals can consider student-student exchange journals. Such journals have the potential to provide the same benefits to students as a teacher-student exchange journal, and because students are communicating with their peers, they can create much greater interest. A true desire to communicate can be created with students happy to participate out of enjoyment rather than compulsion. Making the journal an anonymous exchange also increases students' motivation for writing by adding the element of mystery.

## The Value of Journal Writing

Journal writing, although not the focus of most writing courses, has probably been one of the most successful and popular additions to writing activities. The impetus for the prevalent use of journals has come largely from the recent emphasis on process approaches to writing, where less attention is paid to the finished product and more to the writing process itself. Within the process approach, Faigley (1986) identifies two schools: the cognitivists and the expressionists. While the cognitivists focus on the writer's mental processes (e.g., Hayes and Flower 1983), the expressionist school emphasizes creativity, self-discovery, and self-actualization. According to the expressionists, writing is considered an art which is "a creative act in which the process-the discovery of the true self-is as important as the product-the self discovered and expressed" (Berlin 1988:484). Advocates of an expressive process approach to writing tend to favor activities such as journal writing, which aim at fluency and gaining personal power over the act of writing (Elbow 1991). Journal writing can allow a personal voice to develop, which is often lost when only traditional basic writing skills are stressed. Because journals involve students in non-threatening exploration and development of ideas, Kirby et al suggest that journals are "the most consistently effective tool for establishing fluency" (1988:57). It has also been frequently noted in ESL writing that the quality of writing is much higher for unassigned topics than for assigned ones (e.g., Edelsky 1986). This has been found to be particularly true when writers have a real audience, when writers have a personal involvement in what they are writing, and when it is purposeful-all of which journals have the potential to provide for students.

## Student-teacher Dialogue Journals

Student-teacher dialogue journals are a popular vehicle for writing teachers to communicate regularly with their students. In such journal exchanges, the teacher ideally is "a participant in an ongoing, written conversation with the student, rather than an evaluator who corrects or comments on the student's writing" (Peyton 1993:1). In such exchanges students are both reading

and writing and are provided with "the opportunity to use writing to communicate and to express concepts that are important to them, to accomplish real purposes, to be read by an interested audience, and to receive a reply that is genuine and meaningful" (Peyton 1990:11). Staton also suggests that dialogue journals can "serve as a bridge between natural spoken conversation, with its participants and turns, and the traditional classroom tasks of essay and report writing" (1987:1).

Unfortunately, however, carrying on a student-teacher exchange with all the students in a class can be very time-consuming, and for those teachers with a heavy teaching load and large classes it would most likely be an impossible dream. In addition, if a teacher does not have the time to respond adequately or personally to students' journal entries, such exchanges can become somewhat mechanical, with the teacher not really providing students with enough content for students to react to or an authentic "listener" to communicate with. Peyton suggests that if a teacher's entries just echo what the student writes or only ask a lot of questions, interaction can be stifled rather than promoted. "The goal is to be responsive to student topics and concerns, to ask questions, to introduce topics, and to write about oneself" (1993:4). Without this kind of interaction, students may come to see journal writing as another meaningless, burdensome writing assignment.

## **Student-student Exchange Journals**

An alternative to student-teacher exchanges and one which in many ways is more likely to fulfill the goals, Peyton suggests, is student-student exchanges. As an EFL teacher of composition to English Department undergraduates at Tamkang University in Taiwan, I have used student-teacher exchange journals for several years, but due to large classes I have never been completely satisfied with the quality or quantity of my responses to my students' journals. Having a large number of journals to respond to makes it difficult to develop truly personalized communication with all of my students; in fact, I found many of my responses were somewhat artificial and forced. Carrying a pile of student journals home every week to read and respond to also became a real burden alongside the piles of compositions to mark. After several years of carrying on such exchanges with my second-year students, a colleague at Tamkang University and I decided to try doing a student-student journal exchange between classes, an approach suggested by Reid, who believes that it is not necessary for dialogue journal partners to be teachers. Reid suggests that students can also interact with other students, which creates situations in which "partners learn to respond honestly and directly in a non-judgmental way, offering options for future dialog" (1993:164). Since my colleague's class was at the same level and contained the same number of students-25, it made the exchange of student journals a fairly simple procedure to carry out.

## **Why a "Secret" Exchange Journal?**

When we carried out our inter-class journal exchange, students were not told the real name of their journal partners; instead, students adopted pseudonyms to use in their journals. The reason for keeping identities secret was to add an element of mystery and anonymity which we hoped

would encourage students to express opinions more openly than if their real identities were known. It also allowed students to adopt another persona if they wished. Many students chose names of the opposite gender, or names that did not identify the gender. Others chose names of things or people they were interested in, e.g., Computers, Dance, Nolan Ryan. To help ensure anonymity, their real identity was known only to their teachers and the students who selected the pseudonyms. Nevertheless, many students engaged in a guessing game, trying to find clues to their partner's identity in the journal entries. One student, for instance, wrote, "I was often wondering who you really are. I might have seen you if you are a transfer from night department. There's just too little details for me to guess which one is you. That's interesting! You may guess who I am too!" (Nicky to Patrick).

The students were also given the option of writing on the inside cover that they didn't want their teachers to read their journals; however, only one pair chose to do so, although some discussed this in their journals. One student, for example, suggested to her partner, "Let's not show the teacher" (Cal); however, her partner replied, "Why not? I am very proud of our work in this journal" (Sears). Another student wrote, "I do not like teachers read our journal. My reason is keeping secrets will be fun. What we discuss teachers may not be interested in. Maybe there are a lot of mistakes and teachers always want to correct them" (Everyman to Nolan Ryan).

## **What are the Benefits?**

If teachers were originally carrying on student-teacher exchanges, the primary benefit of adopting student- student exchanges is, of course, reduction of the workload. For the students, perhaps the biggest benefit of regularly exchanging journals is that the journals provide them with an opportunity for genuine and meaningful communication. Like teachers, peers can function as a real audience which can provide writers with the opportunity to develop reader-based prose as opposed to the typical writer-based prose which students tend to produce when they lack a real audience (Zamel 1982). The importance of the reader/writer connection could be seen in exchanges between our Taiwanese students like the following: "I like the way you talk to me, because from you I can hear the truth, I cherish all your advice to me. Moreover, I know every word I write, you read it carefully. You also try to write more and tell me more" (Pocahontas to Accident).

Another major benefit of students' exchanging journals with other students instead of teachers is commonality of interests. It is likely that students and teachers often are not interested in discussing the same topics, thereby possibly limiting both the quantity of writing due to problems finding a topic of common interest and also the quality due to a lack of engagement in a topic under discussion. How many teachers would truly be interested in discussing such topics as students' clubs, a local Chinese singing star, or gossip on the students' electronic bulletin board system (BBS), all of which are interesting for many students here at Tamkang University? In addition, how many students would feel comfortable philosophizing about life, or giving or asking for advice about personal problems from a teacher?

The range of topics our students discussed over the course of one academic year was in fact astoundingly wide. A small sample of topics include: relations with China, elections in Taiwan,

dealing with exams, a suicide on campus, dealing with foreigners, teachers and their teaching styles, learning strategies, school policies, getting along with roommates, failed love affairs, mood swings, sports, movies, and even the retelling of jokes they had heard. Topics between students sometimes changed with each entry; however, students often continued a thread of conversation over several journal entries.

At the end of the academic year, my students were asked to write about the experience of keeping an exchange journal and whether they considered the student-student exchange to be superior to the teacher- student exchange journals which the students had kept during their first-year composition class. All students responded that the student-student journals were superior and suggested we continue using this form of exchange with students the following year.

When asked what benefits they had obtained from keeping the journals, almost every student in the evaluation noted the social function. Most stated that the biggest benefit was that they had made a new and intimate friend with whom they could share their feelings and problems. "I think I've made a new friend and improved my writing a lot by exchanging this journal with my partner. We can share our mood, interests, and experiences. I found it wonderful to join others' world" (Randy). Several students mentioned that they felt more confident in themselves as writers and were surprised by the amount of writing they had produced over the year. A few students noted that the element of secrecy was especially motivating for them. Others suggested that having students instead of teachers respond to their journals allowed them to focus more on content and worry less about form. The student-student exchange seemed to remove the pressure of writing to a teacher who is perceived as judging the writing, even if they do not directly make corrections or give grades.

Although many of my students are word counters when it comes to writing essays, I found that most journal entries exceeded the minimum requirements-one single-spaced A4-sized page each week- because most seemed to truly enjoy the experience. Many exchanges between students like the following were found: "Receiving your response is like receiving a precious present. Makes me be so glad and excited. And I have so many things to tell you!" (Media to Fairy). "It's a good thing to share many things with you and I also feel happy that we will use up this book. That means we have many words to say and we don't think to write a journal is just a work but a pleasure" (Jemi to Mara). "I can't help but write so many words each time. Anyway, I'll always cherish the happy time between us and I believe that sharing this journal with you will be the most unforgettable and sweetest memory of my composition class in my college life" (Fido Dido to Sami in her last entry of the term).

Motivation increased as students made a kind of commitment to communicate with one another. Many students looked forward eagerly to picking up their journals. One student wrote: "I felt very excited when I opened my journal because you wrote so many words, you know, it makes me feel warm" (Blue to Maruko). One pair, who also wrote the most in quantity, were especially enthusiastic. One of the partners wrote, "The 'journal' is a sweet homework for me, and I am very grateful to you because you are a wonderful partner. Every time when I pick the journal, I always look forward to what new ideas or the feeling of life you will share with me, and whenever I see the several pages you reply to me, I am so happy and satisfied. Of course, I also try my best to

think and find the most interesting or meaningful things which I can tell you every week. Anyway, I know that we both care the journal very much, right?"(Get to Angel).

Students also occasionally expressed disappointment at times if their partners' responses were too short, and this seemed to motivate students to try to write longer and more interesting entries. One pair had the following exchange: "Why you only wrote a short journal to me?!" (Pocahontas). "Please forgive me! I will write much more this time" (Accident). Teacher intervention, except initially, was rarely necessary as students pressured each other if journals were not exchanged on time. For example in another entry, Accident wrote, "Why didn't you answer my journal? Are you too busy to remember? Maybe. You know when I went to T-building to take this journal I was very excited to see your reply, but I became sad as soon as I found you didn't answer yet. It's meaningless for me to have nobody answer my journal. OK!"

Other skills that the journals seemed to help students develop were strategies for comprehension and communication as students often had to negotiate meaning. Many examples of the following strategies were found: underlining words and asking for definitions, e.g., "What does\_\_\_\_mean?"; and asking for clarification, e.g., "Did you mean\_\_\_\_?" Students also occasionally asked for grammar or usage advice; requested help with the translation of difficult Chinese phrases and proverbs, or concepts; or corrected their partners' entries or made suggestions, e.g., "I think that sometimes you don't use 'is, am, are,...' in right way. If so, your sentence will lack a proper verb to make the sentence complete" (Danz to Change). Students were thus given opportunities to adopt the role of knowledgeable teacher instead of always playing the part of learner.

Another feature that was often found in the journals was mutual encouragement about language learning frustrations. One example was when one student wrote to her partner, "Can you tell me what you think about my writing? Does it bad or good? Can you see mistakes?" (Sears). Her partner wrote back: "I think your words are fluent enough, and make people aware of what you want to say. I just want to say that we are still learning. There is still much that we should learn and improve. Don't feel sad, upset, afraid or something like that. If you keep minding them (mistakes), you should become no better but worse. I'd also like you to indicate my errors in my writing. Then we can discuss them together and learn, right!" (Cal).

## **What are the Logistics?**

If you would like to have your students carry on a secret journal exchange, here are some things to consider in order to help ensure that students have a successful and productive experience.

### ***Introducing the idea to your students***

It is very important that initial instructions are given very clearly. Written instructions together with oral instructions are preferable to oral instructions alone, as many students when asked if they understand, will say "yes" when the real answer is "no"; other students do not make any notes about oral instructions and simply forget what they are supposed to do. It is also important to explain to students why you believe that this type of exchange is valuable to them, and why

writing to other perhaps less able students will not destroy their writing skills. If they see the value and logic they will be much more motivated.

### ***What materials?***

Select a suitable notebook from a local bookstore, and tell the students in both classes to buy the exact same book. With two books, each student will always have a journal with them to write in if and when inspiration strikes, which in the case of my students is often in an unbearably boring class which they must attend. Ask students to select a "journal" name and write it in the inside of their book along with their teacher's name and department name, so if the book is lost, it can be returned to the teacher. Tell students not to write on the outside of the notebook-this is important for preserving anonymity. A few students in my class did figure out who their partners were when they saw the partner carrying their notebook, which had some identifying mark or word on the cover.

### ***How are partners matched-up?***

It can be very difficult to match students up perfectly, but there are some things you can do to make the match-ups work smoother. If you can find a class with the same number of students as yours, then you can match them up one-to-one. If there is an uneven number, you could assign two journals to willing and ambitious students. Another possibility is keeping the exchange within your own class, but I find this is not as exciting for the students. You could also consider exchanges with other local schools or schools in other countries, but there can be a problem with mailing costs, or technological problems if you use e-mail. It is also not uncommon to hear about cases where a class has been "burnt" by an exchange group in another country. Keeping the exchange within your school helps give teachers control when inevitable small problems arise. If students in the other class do not deposit journals on time or do not follow instructions correctly, it is a simple matter to go and talk to the teacher of the other class. I also find that students from the same school almost never run out of topics as they can always discuss the school, its system, teachers, the department, upcoming exams, recent gossip, etc.

If you are working in a quarter or semester system, you also need to consider whether you want students to keep the same partners for more than one semester or quarter, or if you want to have them write to new ones. Even though it takes another round of matching students, I believe, based on my students' reactions, that switching partners adds more interest. At the beginning of the second semester that I used student exchange journals, only one pair wanted (and insisted) that they keep the same partners. These students had developed an extremely close friendship through writing in the journals and did not want to lose it.

Another important issue to consider when matching students is gender. I found that mixed pairs often seemed to discourage communication for my Taiwanese students, as illustrated by extracts like the following: "Last semester my partner was a boy. You know we are different sex, so what a shame, I could not discuss some private problem with him. Now, I guess you are a girl, right? I hope we can become bosom friends!" (Belle to Claire). "From your script, I know you're a boy, right? That's great! So I guess you must love sports, if you do we can talk about it next time!" (Nolan Ryan to Everyman).

Despite all good efforts at matching students and no matter how much you explain or try to motivate, you may still get one or two students with negative attitudes, who consider any writing boring and want to put as little effort as possible into the journals. If you discover this kind of student is in your class, see if there is a similar student in the other class and try matching them up in the next term or quarter. Then at least they are not ruining any other student's fun. It is sometimes a good idea to do a freewrite in class, asking students to give you feedback about the exchange journals. This may help you become aware of any unnoticed problems such as incompatible partners or students who are habitually late in returning their journals, etc.

### ***The picking up and dropping off of journals***

You need to assign a convenient place and time for students to deposit and pick up journals. I chose to put a box in our English department office and wrote exchange times on the box. I also attached a sign-in book to the box in which each pair had their names recorded on a page. Students wrote the date in this book and signed their names each time they picked up and dropped off their journals. This helps the teacher to monitor the exchanges and find out if any pairs are not exchanging on a regular basis.

### ***How often and how much?***

This will depend on your class schedule and your students' writing ability. But be sure to explain your requirements to students clearly-how many pages should be completed, how many entries should be made every week, and when they should be dropped off and picked up-and continue to remind them frequently, at least in the beginning. Also be sure to let students know how you will evaluate their efforts. Since this activity is aimed at fluency and not accuracy, setting a minimum page number would probably be the most appropriate method of assigning a mark. Use a sign-up book as mentioned above and tell students you will check it regularly, or find another such method, to monitor students.

## **Conclusion**

Having learnt from the problems we encountered in the first year at Tamkang University, we are still continuing our student exchanges more smoothly this year. Based on the students' enjoyment and their exploration of self, improvement in their attitudes to writing and themselves as writers, and the quantity and quality of writing done in the journals, I consider it one of the most successful activities my students have done in composition class. And most of my students agreed, writing comments in their evaluation such as the following: "To write the journal make my life become more colorful. It is like the spice in my daily life. I read each word my partner writes carefully. To tell the truth, I feel my heart is filled with the sense of achievement after writing the journal" (Booboo). "I am grateful to you for giving me the chance to keep journal. Because of the journal, I have a new friend whom I can talk to and share joy and sadness with each other. It is a special experience and I thank you for this kind of opportunity" (Nelson).

Although this kind of journal writing does not teach students how to write an academic essay, it can still be a very useful addition to many writing courses. It provides students with the opportunity to develop fluency in their use of expressive language, allowing development of a personal voice, and it gives them the opportunity to increase their awareness of the importance of



audience. For the teacher, however, probably the biggest advantages of having your students exchange journals are the eagerness with which they anticipate and read their partner's response entries and the interest it adds to the writing class

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